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Items for information: national quality assurance frameworks

National quality assurance frameworks

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report was prepared at the request of the Statistical Commission at its forty-first session (E/2010/24, chap. I.A). It summarizes the activities and discussions undertaken by the United Nations Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks in response to recommendations made by the Commission at its forty-first session and presents its programme of work for 2011. The report is submitted to the Commission for information.

* E/CN.3/2011/1.

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I. Introduction

1. At its forty-first session, the Statistical Commission had before it the report of Statistics Canada, which contained a programme review on national quality assurance frameworks (E/CN.3/2010/2). Based on a global consultation process, the report presented a review of current quality concepts, frameworks and tools; advocated the use by national statistical offices of a national quality assurance framework and described its basic elements; put forward three illustrative proposals for a generic template for such a framework which, it suggested, should be accompanied by guidelines to assist national statistical offices in the formulation of their individual frameworks; and outlined a process for developing the generic template and guidelines.

2. The Statistical Commission:

(a) Welcomed the high-quality programme review contained in the report of Statistics Canada on national quality assurance frameworks and expressed its appreciation to Statistics Canada for the work that it had carried out as programme reviewer;

(b) Thanked the Statistical Office of the European Communities and the International Monetary Fund for their contributions to the report and expressed gratitude to regional agencies and States that had provided valuable comments on the draft version;

(c) Emphasized the importance of the topic and fully supported the development of a quality assurance framework template that would focus on national statistical systems, using existing frameworks to the extent possible, and that would be sufficiently flexible to take national circumstances into consideration;

(d) Recognized that such a template is only a first step in the process of developing a full quality management programme;

(e) Supported the establishment of an expert group on quality assurance, with due consideration to be given to proper regional representation, and welcomed the offers made by States and international agencies to serve in the group;

(f) Recognized the importance of engaging users, especially in the regional consultation processes proposed;

(g) Requested that the United Nations Statistics Division and international agencies develop tools and provide guidance and training, especially to developing countries that wish to introduce or strengthen their quality management procedures. In this context, the Commission asked the Division to upgrade its quality assurance website to include links to relevant quality assurance tools and guidelines already developed by States and international agencies.

II. Establishment of the United Nations Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks and its terms of reference

A. Members of the Expert Group

3. The United Nations Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks was constituted in August 2010. Representatives of the following 17 countries were invited to serve as members: Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Egypt, France, Indonesia, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Mexico, Niger, Norway, Qatar, South Africa, Switzerland and Ukraine. In addition, the following agencies and international organizations were invited to serve as observers: the Statistical Office of the European Communities, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, Economic Commission for Africa, Economic Commission for Europe, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. South Africa agreed to serve as the Chair of the Expert Group, with the Statistics Division acting as the secretariat.

B. Terms of reference

4. It was decided that, at least in the early stages, the Expert Group would conduct most of its discussions by means of e-mail exchanges. The Expert Group's work was seen as falling into two stages: (a) defining the scope and content of the generic national quality assurance framework template, developing the template while taking existing frameworks into account and establishing a mapping exercise for them, and formulating, to the extent possible, standard terminology on quality; and (b) drawing up a training and knowledge transfer strategy, including guidelines for the application of the template with real examples drawn from national statistical offices working in different environments. The Expert Group would present a progress report to the Commission in 2011 and aim to complete its work in time to present its conclusions and recommendations to the Statistical Commission in 2012.

III. Progress report on discussions and work undertaken

5. The Chair and the secretariat launched the initial discussion by soliciting input from all members and observers of the Expert Group on a set of questions pertaining to:

- Each State's or agency's experiences with the development or use of a national quality assurance framework;
- The problems and obstacles experienced or anticipated in developing and implementing a national quality assurance framework;
- The main needs and priorities from a country perspective vis-à-vis the development and implementation of a national quality assurance framework;
- Initial comments regarding the three proposed templates for a generic national quality assurance framework that were presented in the Statistics Canada report.

6. The feedback received indicated that half of the member countries of the Expert Group responding to the initial set of questions had some type of formal quality assurance framework in place while the other half did not, but all had various quality guidelines or quality control, assessment or management processes of one kind or another in place. The experience and expertise of the Expert Group varied greatly, with many able to share quality tools, good practices and valuable lessons learned. Sustained support, especially from senior management, was considered to be of paramount importance to the successful implementation of a national quality assurance framework. Guidance, especially on the implementation phases of the quality assurance frameworks and tools, will be required by countries. Opinions varied regarding the three proposed generic national quality assurance framework templates that had been presented in the Statistics Canada report, and several members proposed developing a fourth alternative as a combination of the three. The Expert Group agreed to proceed by working on the detailed content of each of the proposed templates.

7. As recommended by the Statistical Commission, the Statistics Division continued working on upgrading its quality assurance website, which will serve as a platform for the exchange of information and experiences on national and international quality assurance work. The Chair and the secretariat invited the Expert Group to provide, on an ongoing basis, new information as it becomes available, as well as additional links and documents on national and international quality work. This information is available from: http://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/QualityNQAF/nqaf.aspx. Information taken from the Internet concerning other countries and agencies is also available at this website, which will be continually updated and enhanced with the aim of containing a comprehensive inventory of countries' and international organizations' quality work.

IV. Programme of work

8. The Expert Group on National Quality Assurance Frameworks will continue to conduct most of its work by means of e-mail exchanges and telephone conferences, at least in the early stages. A physical meeting may be organized at a later stage. The following programme of work is being proposed:

Phase 1: fourth quarter of 2010 and first quarter of 2011

- Identify and review current quality practices, and include additional links/documentation on them in the website inventory
- Review and clarify currently used terminology and reach agreement on development of a common quality glossary
- Work on defining the scope of the national quality assurance frameworks
- Review existing quality mechanisms and tools

Phase 2: second quarter of 2011

- Work on defining a national quality assurance framework template

- Compile/develop guidelines for the implementation of the national quality assurance frameworks and include lessons learned already by others in the implementation stages (continue into phase 3)
- Map existing frameworks to the national quality assurance framework template

Phase 3: third and fourth quarters of 2011

- Compile/develop guidelines for the implementation of the national quality assurance frameworks, including lessons learned already by others in the implementation stages
- Develop training materials to be used in training workshops
- Identify practices that constitute desirable minimum standards
- Draft guidelines with best practices, examples and practical measurable indicators.

9. In conclusion, the Expert Group aims to complete its work by the end of 2011 and will present its recommendations to the Statistical Commission in 2012. In terms of concrete deliverables, the first one, namely the quality website, has already been produced and will be continually updated as additional information becomes available. The timeline for the remaining key deliverables is as follows:

(a) March 2011: agreement on a common quality glossary and on the scope of the national quality assurance frameworks;

(b) July 2011: a generic national quality assurance framework template including mapping to existing frameworks;

(c) December 2011: recommendations on the desirable minimum requirements for implementing the components of the generic national quality assurance framework template, as well as guidelines for the application of the template, building on best practices and real examples drawn from national statistical offices.